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REVIEW OF FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS IN FIELDS WITH WHICH THE SUB-COMMISSION HAS BEEN CONCERNED

Written statement submitted by the International Association of Educators for World Peace, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[19 August 1994]

Traditional practices affecting the health of women and children

1. Is female circumcision a clear violation of the human right detailed in article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stating: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment"? Is it an act of violence or an act of choice? Furthermore, can people, even experts, outside the culture ever wholly understand what female circumcision means to the people who practise it? The anthropologist Ruth Benedict explains that each culture is like a woven cloth, each tradition being a thread, or a colour, woven in that cloth that makes the whole. Try to slip out a thread here and there and the culture is in danger of unravelling. Can we trace every thread of the web one ritual weaves to know the danger posed to that culture if this practice is removed?

2. In a few cultures in which female circumcision is practised, the web is extensive. Some traditional practices were aimed, in traditional societies, at the closer incorporation of the individual within the social environment in order to enable him or her to benefit from all the rights of the individual which these societies recognized. Such cultures use female circumcision symbolically: initiating a girl into womanhood; delineating the masculine from the feminine; separating the past from the future. In these types of culture, the people, including some of the women, actively support this traditional practice. It is seen as a painful but significant and meaningful part of their life. IAEWP believes, however, that in the cultures which make up the majority of the peoples who practise female circumcision, the motives and the pressures are different, and that the practice of female circumcision in these groups can be described as a violation of human rights. One portion of this group agrees with the practice for traditional reasons but, unlike the first group, they do so passively, referring back to traditional society without sharing that society's values. They acquiesce to their elders and their community's general expectations, but cannot answer definitively why they are having this done to their daughters.

3. The other portion of this group supports the practice actively, but for economic reasons. In these groups, great importance is placed on lineage, and caught up in this value system is the importance of the woman's virginity at the time of marriage. Seeing women as an economic liability, these cultures use the dowry system to compensate for the addition of the bride to the husband's family. A girl who is not a virgin burdens her family with a much higher dowry, for she is no longer a "high-quality good". Thus, girls' parents actively support female circumcision and infibulation to save them increased expense by ensuring the daughter's virginity.

4. In the case of the first group, IAEWP believes we should move cautiously and thoughtfully. A mistake here could have the same disastrous effects as allowing an institution like slavery to continue in order that a culture's mechanisms be protected. But we cannot take away the right of choice in our efforts to provide the right of safety. Too often, we have imposed our morality on others. In the United States of America, the majority imposed its moral decision upon Native Americans and forbade the use of peyote in their religious practices. The destructive ripples of this decision are still being felt.

5. Immediate action should be taken to stop female circumcision in groups whose motives for continuance are weakly felt or ecoromic in nature. Passivity is not good; it communicates tolerance instead of advocacy, and is often a learned defence. Because this practices involves 75 million females, most of whom are children, we must not tolerate female circumcision as a cultural trait unless it is, in form, exactly that. The practice is excruciatingly painful and has lasting physiological and psychological effects, and should not be tolerated if not adamantly supported.

6. In the groups which act out of economic motive, the prohibition of the practice is a highest imperative if we believe in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the practice here is clearly degrading and dehumanizing. Some groups encourage the future bride to be "examined" by the man's entire family before the marriage to ensure that she is a virgin, and thus a "wise buy". United Nations documents tell us that in Somalia there is a practice of piercing thorns through the labia during the process of infibulation. This can be interpreted in no other way than as a form of punishment and torture. Also, because circumcision is often done with crude, unsterile tools (pieces of glass, razor blades, straw), the infection that ensues can lead, among other egregious effects, to infertility, which in turn leads to the further devaluation of, the divorce from, and even the excommunication of a woman from her community. Here are clear examples of violations of basic human rights outlined in numerous articles in the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights.

7. IAEWP believes the countries which have ratified the Covenants should carry out their promise or be held accountable. IAEWP supports the Plan of Action outlined in the report of the first United Nations regional seminar on traditional practices affecting the health of women and children (Ouagadougou, 29 April-3 May 1991) (E/CN/Sub.2/1991/48), stressing expressly the importance of education. We feel the first step is to pass legislation allowing educators to enter the countries which have not ratified the Covenants. Next, educate the people as outlined in the aforementioned document. Provide the people with information and options from which to choose freely. Then, let the people decide for themselves whether or not a change is called for. If they decide that it is, internal advocacy in their own Governments should begin. If help is then needed in any way, let us provide it.

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